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Ethics in Public: The Return of Antagonistic Performance

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In 2009, *The New York Times* published a review of a show by the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski at X Initiative. It largely focused on one particular work, *80064* (2004), in which the artist persuades an Auschwitz survivor to have the identification number tattoo on his left forearm refreshed. The reviewer asks the question: ‘was this hackneyed lesson worth the price of an old man’s peace of mind?’. He then goes on to describe Żmijewski’s practice as ‘morally troubling’ and ‘sociologically provocative’.¹ The Dutch artist Renzo Martens has received similar attention, inciting strong reactions after screenings of his work *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2009). During the filming of this video piece he was ordered by the United Nations to leave the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the geographical subject of *Episode III*, in light of his allegedly unethical treatment of local participants in the work.²

As art has undergone its well-documented and much debated shift away from representation towards materially embedded practices – or as Nikos Papastergiadis puts it, ‘from image production to the initiation of scenes for the replaying of social relations’ – criticisms such as those directed at Martens and Żmijewski have become increasingly commonplace.³ Artists’ desires to do something, as Dan Graham allegedly demanded, ‘more social... and more real than art’, have led to the adoption of increasingly ‘collaborative or collective modes of production’ as a means of importing sociality into the artistic process.⁴ Claire Bishop suggested in 2006 that, in light of this paradigm shift, the artwork is no longer the site of critique; rather it is the ‘working process – the degree to which artworks supply good or bad models of collaboration’.⁵ Anthony Downey later elaborated upon this observation, suggesting that it is the ‘ethical efficacy’ of collaboration between artists and participants that provides the basis for much of the criticism of materially embedded practices.⁶

It is not, however, possible to characterize, as Bishop does, the ‘ethical turn’ in criticism as simply an inadvertent side effect of the structural introduction of collaborative forms of engagement into art.⁷ Grant Kester, whom Bishop has implicated in this supposed subjugation of the aesthetic to the ethical, has suggested that many exponents of the ‘collaborative turn’ deliberately take ethics as their subject matter, purposefully implementing the ‘strategic production of shame or guilt in the viewer (in

order to awaken a presumably dormant ethical sensibility)'.⁸ The curator Kirsten Lloyd has commented of Martens and Źmijewski that they 'apparently relish the shock induced when they substitute the ultra-ethical artist-as-social worker with the deliberately provocative artist-as-sociopath model'.⁹ As such, it seems irrefutable that the increasing currency of ethics in discussions of contemporary art is not merely the result of theoretical exegesis, but rather the effect of a concerted effort on the part of many contemporary practitioners (of which Martens and Źmijewski are arguably the most visible) to probe via artistic means what the French philosopher Alain Badiou has described as the 'ethical delirium' of contemporary society.¹⁰ In this chapter, I investigate one means by which this ethical probing is achieved, namely, the reintroduction of performance as a materially embedded component in the artistic process.

It is on the subject of performance that Martens and Źmijewski, so often mentioned in tandem as examples of an ethically transgressive tendency in contemporary art, diverge. In the case of Źmijewski's practice, Downey suggests that it is the artist's coercion of participants to 'debase themselves in the name of artistic production' that provides the predominant basis for his ethical transgressions.¹¹ However these participants are largely aware of the exercise in which they partake. They may not particularly enjoy it, they may even be thoroughly degraded, as Downey suggests, by the experience, yet their involvement is consensual, taking the form of an agreed financial transaction. Martens, by contrast, commits an ethical transgression based upon the strategic utilization of various antagonisms intrinsic to performance.

Episode III is a 90-minute film documenting Martens' actions over a two-year period spent in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The artist acts as central protagonist, shifting between the roles of journalist, post-colonial tourist, aid worker, pedagogue, and film-maker in the course of making a deliberately confusing, complex, and contradictory argument regarding humanitarian aid and photojournalism. His artistic intentions are not made consistently explicit during *Episode III*. Instead, he intermingles moments of brutal honesty (informing participants that the film is not intended for them and will only be shown in Europe) with periods during which he is secretive and even misleading as to his role and purpose (tricking a group of local photographers into believing that they could have successful careers as international press photographers, all the while fully aware that this plan is flawed and doomed to failure). The upshot is that participants readily interacted with Martens while remaining subject to continually unstable assumptions.

Martens has been far from alone in adopting such a performance-based process as a means of exploring society's 'ethical delirium'. Artists such as the Estonian Kristina Norman and the Israeli/Czech

Shlomi Yaffe as well as tactical media exponents The Yes Men have utilized such strategies to similar ends. Focusing on these examples, it is my intention firstly, to examine the specificities of performance in order to discern the root of its ethical potentiality and to explain its return as a widely employed artistic strategy. Secondly, I shall examine the reception of such work and will contrast reactions to the ‘art’ practices of Martens, Norman and Yaffe with the more ‘activist’ work of The Yes Men. This will highlight a discrepancy in the ethical judgement of performance when deployed in these two different contexts.

Performance is Dangerous

‘Performance is dangerous’, as the performance theorist Richard Schechner has noted. It is ‘subjunctive’, ‘liminal’ and ‘duplicitous’.¹² It is ‘dangerous’ because it instils a degree of distance or establishes a shield behind which the performer may hide. In playing a role, the performer has license to become more exaggerated in deed and gesture, a caricatured figure whose ‘actions can be carried to extremes’.¹³ Thus performance must be ‘hedged in with conventions and frames’ as a means of making it safe.¹⁴ The conventions associated with television, theatre, radio and cinema offset the threat posed by performance so that, as Schechner suggests, its inherent danger is converted into ‘fun’. When art began to both vacate traditional spaces of exhibition and turn its back on, or at least complicate, the media of painting and sculpture during the 1960s and ’70s, many artists turned their attention to performance. They did so out of a fundamental realization that if performance escaped its ‘conventions and frames’, it could be a powerful, disturbing and, most of all, dangerous tool. Vito Acconci exploited an unsuspecting public, transforming them into oblivious players in his sexualised, transgressive games, while Marina Abramović coaxed the gallery-going classes into incongruous acts of savagery and brutality.¹⁵

Throughout this first wave of performance art the intention was never, however, simply danger for danger’s sake. Rather the goal was to achieve Dan Graham’s ‘dream of doing something that’s more social, more collaborative, and more real than art’. Paradoxically, the constructed and illusory nature of performance was seen to afford the possibility to actualize precisely that dream. However, as performance became a familiar medium, it became subject to another set of ‘conventions and frames’. The danger dissipated and, with it, the prospect of doing something ‘more real than art.’ The artist Yvonne Rainer recently commented on the decreased impact of Abramović’s re-performances at her 2010 MoMA retrospective, ‘The Artist is Present’, in which the artist procured the services of performers to play roles

that she had originally fulfilled herself. Rainer expressed her displeasure at Abramović's 'obliviousness to differences in context (and to) the implications of transposing her own powerful performances to the bodies of others'.¹⁶

During the 1990s, particularly amongst the practices of the artists discussed by Nicolas Bourriaud in his analysis of contemporary participatory art, *Relational Aesthetics*, performance regained substantial visibility in the major outlets of the international art world. However, the particular brands of performance that proliferated in this period were typically of a framed and conventionalized form. On the one hand there are performances that are designed to be pleasant, consensual, and inclusive. The cookery performances of Rirkrit Tiravanija, for instance, are bound by an awareness of the rules of the game being played. On the other hand, a tendency towards what Bishop refers to as 'delegated performance' has also emerged. She notes that 'in the early '90s, particularly in Europe... artists started to pay or persuade other people to undertake their performances'.¹⁷ Regardless of the ethical implications of hiring participants to perform as part of an artwork, the very process of hiring implies a system of practices within which performance is made subject to familiar customs and controls.¹⁸ The participants are aware that they are contributing to a performance and know largely what kind of performance is being enacted.

Shannon Jackson, in her book *Social Works*, and Grant Kester, in *The One and the Many*, have both commented on just how prevalent the performative is in contemporary artistic practice. In addition to the examples discussed above, they cite a plethora of others including works by Superflex, Paul Chan, and Elmgreen and Dragset.¹⁹ Elsewhere, theorists such as Jan Verwoert and Sven Lütticken have commented on ways in which neoliberalism an everyday labour of 'general performance'.²⁰ Verwoert claims that 'one thing seems certain: after the disappearance of manual labour from the lives of most people in the Western world, we have entered into a culture where we no longer just work, we perform'.²¹ In a wide variety of contemporary contexts, both artistic and societal, Jackson's recognition of a 'performative turn' seems most apt.²² The strand of performance under discussion in this chapter, however, is specifically that which returns to performance art of the 1960s and '70s in order to locate its idioms and tactics.

While usually termed 'socially engaged' or 'participatory' art, it is essential to acknowledge the debt that artists such as Martens owe to earlier forms of performance art. Martens himself has identified his practice with performance, stating that 'the film is a performance of the discourses of the white man (Renzo Martens) taking responsibility for everything we in the West are and do'.²³ Fundamental to

defining this practice as performance is the centrality of role-playing to the artistic process. In contrast, for example, to the work of a similarly ‘socially engaged’ or ‘participatory’ artist such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Martens and the other artists to whom I shall turn shortly, privilege a destabilization of the artist’s position within the artwork. While Hirschhorn’s subjectivity as artist is cast as permanent and immovable throughout his many pavilion and monument works, those whom I am characterizing as exemplary of the former variety of performance strategically and consistently adopt diverse roles in the service of their artistic practice. Martens, for instance, commented in an interview on *Episode III* of the existence of ‘two Renzos’ within the work.²⁴

A number of other tropes and idioms of earlier styles of performance art are also reintroduced in their practice. Performance has once again escaped the confines of the gallery, the artists themselves are reinstated as central protagonists, and the public implicated in the performance is either unaware of its participation, or of the nature of the performance being enacted. Importantly, in addition to these features, the nature of the performance remains unexplained to those who view the documented performance in a gallery context. This uncertainty on the part of the audience stems from the fusion of performance, replete with its deceptions, dangers and exaggerations, with the documentary form, which despite having been discredited and questioned in terms of its veracity for as long as the form has existed, nevertheless maintains an air of authority and objectivity. This synthesis leaves the viewer in a state of unresolvable ambiguity and confusion as to what it is exactly that he or she is receiving: factual reportage or fictional act? This is particularly the case with Renzo Martens, who, in *Episode III*, frequently and abruptly shifts his character traits from heartfelt sympathy and parodic post-colonial arrogance to reckless playfulness and indifference to those around him. As Ruben de Roo has commented, ‘the ambiguous feeling that the film leaves us with may be attributed in no small measure to its documentary format’.²⁵

The Antagonisms of Performance: Shlomi Yaffe and Kristina Norman

Numerous recent discussions of the turn towards materially embedded practices in contemporary art have focused on the issue of ‘antagonism’.²⁶ In the case of performance-based practices, this concept is particularly pertinent. In art historical contexts, understanding of the term has derived largely from political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.²⁷ Bishop summarizes their formulation of the term, stating that antagonism is ‘the relationship that emerges between ... incomplete entities’, elaborating to explain that ‘the presence of what is not me renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and the threat

that the other represents transforms my *own* sense of self into something questionable'.²⁸ Antagonism is the discomfort generated from the proximity of two bodies, each of which prevents the other from functioning in its entirety, or being fully 'itself'.²⁹ The danger of performance, as discussed by Schechner, derives precisely from this notion of antagonism, or to be more specific, two antagonisms inherent to performance in all its guises. The first of these is internal to the performer, an antagonism between the performer and the performed role. The second, and more significant, is external, between the performer and the public implicated by the performance. The examples of Yaffe and Norman are here apt to demonstrate how these antagonisms manifest themselves in contemporary practice.

Shlomi Yaffe's 2006 video document of a public performance, *How I Changed My Ideology in Prague Market*, shows the artist walking around Prague Market. At the outset of the video, he is dressed simply as himself, clad in black, with moderately long hair and a backpack. At each stall he buys a new item of clothing or accessory, starting with some military-style combat trousers, followed by a camouflage t-shirt, a green and orange bomber jacket and a pair of work boots. Upon purchase, he immediately puts on each item of clothing. Having replaced his own clothes with these new items, he buys a razor and attempts to shave his own head. This proves unsuccessful, so he visits a barber who crops Yaffe's hair. Finally he buys a pair of knuckle-dusters, and the film ends with the artist walking past the camera, placing the knuckle-dusters on his hand and clenching his fist (fig. X.1). While the entire piece takes the form of a public performance, what we witness is a gradual visual transformation from performer (Yaffe) to performed (Yaffe-as-neo-Nazi).³⁰

[Insert fig. X.1 here]

[X.1 Still from Shlomi Yaffe, *How I Changed My Ideology in Prague Market* (2006), 8 minutes, digital video. Image provided courtesy of the artist.]

The first of the antagonisms inherent to performance exists between these two figures, the performer and performed. By adopting a role, the performer is prevented from being fully him or herself by the presence of the character played and the site occupied. As the performance artist Anthony Howell has remarked: 'in performance art, one is artist and artwork at the same time. Thus the issue of the 'subject' and its identity is permeated with ambiguity'.³¹ At the start of Yaffe's work, he is relatively 'himself'. However, with each new item of clothing, he is overtaken by his neo-Nazi persona, his own

identity compromised by this second performed identity. People's reactions to him alter as this new character develops, and his own actions become more in keeping with the supposed traits of the stereotyped role he adopts. When he walks towards the camera and clenches his knuckle-duster bearing fist at the conclusion of the work, this is the action of the performed, as opposed to the performer. Conversely, due to the fact that the performed role is temporary, this character can never 'fully be himself' either. Instead he remains subject to the will of the performer who can remove the costume and return to normality at any moment. Thus there exists a mutual antagonism between performer and performed. This antagonism is, however, consensual. The artist, by virtue of being the instigator, choreographer, and protagonist of the performance is both aware and willing throughout. As such, the danger of performance does not derive *directly* from this performer/performed antagonism, but via a second antagonism, which is predicated upon this first internal antagonism.

This second (external) antagonism is more urgent. The ambiguity generated by the confusion of the performer's two identities prevents bystanders from being fully themselves. Members of the public, unaware that they are taking part in a performance, or unsure as to the nature of the performance, are uncertain whether they are interacting with the performer or the performed, and their interactions are tempered by this uncertainty. Furthermore, the artist's performance casts the implicated public as unconscious performers who then develop their own internal performer/performed dichotomy. Yaffe, for example, implicates the market sellers as actors within the narrative that he constructs. Each becomes complicit in the artist's performative journey towards Neo-Nazism, inadvertently compromising their own identities by becoming players in Yaffe's game. They quite literally become his wardrobe department, providing him with a costume, as well as being extras in the finished production.

Kristina Norman exploits this second antagonism between performer and public as a core conceit of her 2009 work *After-War*. In 2007, Norman made a fifteen-minute documentary video work entitled *Monolith*. This presented a mixture of found footage and video recorded by the artist of the escalating tensions (which ultimately culminated in rioting) between the Estonian and Russian populations of Tallinn that ensued after the removal of a Soviet war memorial (commonly referred to as the 'Bronze Soldier') from central Tallinn.³² This became the basis for *After-War*, an installation exhibited at the Estonian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. The work consisted of, amongst other objects, a 2 metre tall, gold-painted replica of the monument hanging from the ceiling, almost parallel to the ground; a rotating advertising hoarding displaying the site of the monument before and after its

removal; and a video that documented a performance the artist had undertaken on 9th May 2009, the former Soviet ‘Victory Day’ that commemorated the victory of Soviet forces over Nazi Germany in 1945. This video and performance are the elements of *After-War* requiring particular attention for the purposes of this analysis.

The video shows the artist arriving at Tõnismägi, the site of the Bronze Soldier prior to its relocation, amidst a crowd comprising members of the local Russian community to whom 9th May still represents a day of huge historical import. Norman brings with her the vast gold replica of the Bronze Soldier and proceeds to erect it in the spot of the original monument. Those gathered express a near universal gratitude and admiration for the soldier and artist. Some take photographs, others lay flowers around its feet. Within half an hour, however, the police arrive, topple the statue, place it on the back of a police van and remove it and the artist from the scene, amidst the protesting shouts of those gathered in Tõnismägi and the artist herself (fig. X.2). The performance garnered a great deal of media attention, much of it highly critical of the artist. Estonian Interior Minister Juhri Pihl observed: ‘I don’t know whether it is art. It is a provocation though’. Commenters on Estonian online news services left posts such as ‘It is anti-state activity and the “artist” Norman should be sent to prison for a long time’.³³

[Insert fig. X.2 here]

[X.2 Kristina Norman, *After-War* (2009), still from documentation of performance on May 9, 2009, 12 minutes, digital video. Image provided courtesy of the artist.]

While critics of Norman’s work have accused the artist of ethical irresponsibility, I would argue that there is a more intricate form of transgression at work here.³⁴ Norman wins the gathered crowd’s trust, a result of her installation of this statue being seen as a pro-Russian statement, corroborated by the fact that she speaks Russian. They presume, fairly enough, that she is ‘one of them’ and that she shares the same beliefs and goals. However, writing about this performance Norman says the following:

For the Russian community, taking a small replica of the monument to its previous location was kind of an attempt to return “confiscated instruments” to their comrades, so that they could, in a dignified manner, celebrate the *victory* of the Great Patriotic War. I am demonstrating that the

community needs such instruments in order to practise their communal and national identity rituals of intensification.³⁵

In other words, while for the local Russian community Norman's installation of this gold soldier may be seen as a patriotic act, for the artist it is a theoretical exercise, a conceit that demonstrates the conceptual importance of symbolic objects to collective identity formation. In a subsequent interview, the artist even went so far as to acknowledge: 'I took advantage of this situation'.³⁶ Here, the Russian crowd is utilized as a tool in the artist's larger game. The artist's presence as a 'performed identity' renders the audience's own identity precarious: the roles that audience members *believe* they are playing are not the roles they are *perceived* to be playing.

These two antagonisms give rise to a central debate regarding the 'ethical efficacy' of the artistic process, that of exploitation. The artists discussed above prevent participants in the work from being fully themselves, thus infringing 'fundamental liberties' and 'rights', which, as Badiou states, provide many pretexts for contemporary ethics. Furthermore, they use this infringement to suit their own ends.³⁷ Gregory Sholette, in his book *Dark Matter* discusses the art world's reliance on the unpaid, unrewarded, and unacknowledged labour of 'hidden producers' or 'invisibles'.³⁸ In each of *After-War* and *How I Changed my Ideology in Prague Market*, the artist relies on the non-contractual and unwitting participation of individuals encountered over the course of the performance. The works would not exist without the essential roles played by strangers in the two performances, and yet in both cases the latter are unaware of their centrality to proceedings. Indeed, their ignorance of their role is required in order for these performances to attain the degree of danger so important to their constitution.

The Yes Men: *Ethical Pioneers?*

Many artists have, in recent years, been identified (pejoratively) as sociopaths, businessmen, and capitalist exploiters.³⁹ Given the antagonisms I have highlighted in the practices of Norman, Yaffe and Martens, this is perhaps unsurprising. But criticisms such as these downplay the fact that, for the most part, such materially embedded practices have been predicated on what Erik Hagoort has described as 'good intentions'.⁴⁰ Norman, Yaffe, and Martens may, to some degree, exploit unwitting participants in their works; they may all deliberately instigate and intensify antagonisms. They do so, however, in the service of practices that are positively and actively discursive of sociality and the nature of social

relations. Here I differentiate their practices from those of Santiago Sierra, for instance, whose exercises in exploitation seek primarily to expose the inadequacies of the society within which his work is framed.⁴¹ In contrast, Renzo Martens' stark presentation of facts and arguments universally elided in discourses surrounding aid and poverty does much more than simply expose, it prompts a dialogue. This use of performance in the service of a wider political or social project means that these works share more with the realm of tactical media than they do with the works of Sierra. They are interventions as opposed to simply expositions.

The theorist Rita Raley interprets tactical media as a form of performance. She says that 'to conceive of tactical media in terms of performance is to point to a fluidity of its actants, to emphasize its ephemerality'.⁴² The Yes Men commonly adopt false identities, usually mimicking spokespersons for multinational corporations, as a means of disrupting the political sphere. In 2004, Andy Bichlbaum, one of The Yes Men, appeared on BBC World News under the guise of an invented executive of the Dow Chemical Company, Jude Finisterra. His appearance coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, a gas leak caused by the negligence of Union Carbide India Limited, a chemical company taken over by Dow in 2001. Tens of thousands were killed in the incident and many more suffered gas-related diseases. In his appearance on BBC News, Bichlbaum announced that Dow were to inject US\$12 billion into the regeneration of Bhopal, accepting full responsibility for the disaster. Dow shares swiftly dropped in value as tricked investors sought to extricate themselves from this loss-making scheme.

It is the performative elements of The Yes Men's work (the adoption of fictitious characters, the circulation of false narratives) that allow them to operate with such ephemerality. This does not negatively impact on their work's political agency; rather it is central to it. The Yes Men thrive on the immediacy of contemporary mass media, exemplified by twenty-four hour rolling news and instantaneous online coverage. The Bhopal hoax required only 23 minutes to wipe out a substantial portion of Dow's monetary worth by triggering a sudden and massive crisis of confidence in the financial prospects of the company.

While performance provides The Yes Men's work with its political agency, it generates the same antagonisms as seen in Martens, Norman, and Yaffe's work and, likewise, could be critiqued on the grounds of exploitation. Indeed, in their film *The Yes Men Fix The World* (2009) the group devotes a

portion of the introduction of the film to media criticisms of their supposedly unethical behaviour (fig. X.3).

[Insert fig. X.3 here]

[X.3 Still showing Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno visiting Bhopal, from *The Yes Men, The Yes Men Fix The World* (2009), 87 minutes, digital video. Image provided courtesy of The Yes Men.]

In this example, the people of Bhopal, albeit briefly, were under the impression that they were to receive substantial compensation. However, the purpose of The Yes Men's action was not to prompt the remuneration of the residents Bhopal, but rather to stimulate a situation in which 'signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible'.⁴³ The citizens of Bhopal become the invisible 'dark matter' in a political struggle between The Yes Men and the multinationals that the group sets as its targets. After their intervention, The Yes Men visited Bhopal in order to investigate the possibility that they had, in fact, exploited this population, that they had transgressed an ethical boundary for the purpose of achieving some 'greater good'. While the people interviewed universally applauded the actions of The Yes Men, we cannot take their reactions at face value. After all, it is The Yes Men who chose the interviewees, decided which discussions to include in their documentation, and ultimately retained editorial power over the interviews. What is more telling is the fact that they felt the need to visit Bhopal and to measure the reaction at all. In order to further complicate matters, the 'good intentions' of The Yes Men are usually based on critiquing what they deem to be the unethical behaviour of the multinationals they target.⁴⁴ They are often described as a 'corporate ethics activist group,' the *Guardian* newspaper even citing them in an article on 'ethical pioneers changing the way we live'.⁴⁵

As this *Guardian* article demonstrates, The Yes Men have received, on the whole, a far more positive press than, for instance, Martens, despite the similarities common to both (fundamentally, their use of performance to transgress certain ethical boundaries). As such, the reasoning behind the simultaneous condemnation of the artist and praise of the activist according to the same set of ethical criteria must lie elsewhere. If we return to the criticism directed at Żmijewski, quoted at the outset of this chapter, one of the central elements of ethical judgement is revealed. 'Was this hackneyed lesson worth the price of an old man's peace of mind?' asked Ken Johnson. The ethical question posed here is not whether the action of tattooing was, in isolation, 'good' or 'bad', nor whether the lesson being taught is

the result of ‘good intentions’ or bad, but whether the intended outcome of the action was *worth* its negative consequences. What is demanded here is a judgment as to whether an end justifies the means.

Conclusions: The ‘Ethical Efficacy’ of Art and Tactical Media

For an end to justify the means, however, requires the actual existence of an end. Żmijewski never makes the intended outcome of tattooing his subject explicit. Likewise, neither Martens, nor Norman, nor Yaffe consistently and categorically broadcast their goals and objectives. Martens says of *Episode III* that it ‘deals with pain, but then doesn’t offer the audience a way out. Watching it does not, in one way or another, resolve it. And that’s quite a shock to many people.’⁴⁶ The deliberate clouding of artistic intentionality or the resistance of performance to concrete resolution have indeed been symptoms of the recent turn towards materially embedded practices; a strategy that differentiates current tendencies in contemporary art from, for instance, the activist work of feminist artists and collectives such as the Guerrilla Girls. Contrary to Żmijewski’s call in his curatorial thesis for the 2012 Berlin Biennale for ‘an art that acts and works, with effective procedures of change and an ongoing influence on reality,’ artists, including himself, have, on the whole, evaded such instrumentalization at the hands of a political cause.⁴⁷ While artists may espouse certain political affiliations, and while artworks may reference or negotiate a particular social or political cause, it is a rarity now to find unambiguous political ideology or action within the confines of the art world, and when art is framed as such, it is often met with suspicion. An interpretive openness has shown itself to be considerably more desirable for the most part to artists in recent years than quantifiable outcomes. Similarly, while the exhibition of an artwork may seem to represent a form of end, it is the nature of art that this merely represents another moment in its interpretive evolution. At this point it is offered to the audience, critics, art historians and theorists who are free to further debate and suggest various analyses of its content.

This is, perhaps, the defining criterion by which contemporary art can be differentiated from contemporary activism, even though, as I have demonstrated, many other characteristics are shared by the two fields. While art delights in the relative autonomy it is afforded and in the intellectual rumination and interpretive openness this allows, activism seeks a fixed and unambiguous end. Were tactical media exponents to eschew such a distinct conclusion, the negative consequences of their actions would lack any basis for resolution, excusal, or justification. While judgements grounded upon ‘ethical efficacy’

would be detrimental to the causes of activist work, it has been profoundly embraced by artists to the point where ethical transgression, without justification, is actively sought as a constituent part of the artistic process. The unleashing of this style of performance into the public sphere once more has afforded the possibility of precisely such a methodical and, paradoxically, productive transgression of ethics.

¹ Ken Johnson, 'An Artist Turns People Into His Marionettes', *New York Times*, 29th November, 2009, accessed May 28, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/30/arts/design/30zmijewski.html>.

² Anthony Downey, 'An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer', *Third Text* 23, 5 (2009): 601.

³ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'A Global Pursuit of Democratic Dialogue', in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Malden, MA.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 277.

⁴ The provenance of this oft-cited, and perhaps apocryphal, quotation from Dan Graham is not given in any of the numerous texts it is quoted in. It is used as the epigraph of Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (2006): 179. Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

⁵ Bishop, 'The Social Turn', 180.

⁶ Downey, 'An Ethics of Engagement', 595.

⁷ Bishop borrows this term from Jacques Rancière. Bishop, 'The Social Turn', 180.

⁸ Grant H. Kester, 'The Sound of Breaking Glass, Part II: Agonism and the Taming of Dissent', *e-flux*, no. 31 (2012). Renzo Martens echoes Kester's statement claiming that: 'I think the film breaks one clear rule: that audiences should be exempt from the pain' in T.J. Demos, 'Toward a New Institutional Critique: A Conversation with Renzo Martens', *Atlántica*, 52 (2012): 91.

⁹ Kirsten Lloyd, 'The Caress: Intimate Transactions in the Video Work of Dani Marti', in *Dani Marti*, ed. Matt Price (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 71.

¹⁰ 'Ethical delirium', Badiou contends, is the repressed and consensualized societal state deriving from the hegemonic 'ideological current' of 'moralism' and 'generalized victimization' which characterized the period during which the book was written, the early 1990s. He states that 'the presumed "rights of man" were serving at every point to annihilate any attempt to invent forms of free thought.' It is arguable

that such a designation still pertains almost two decades later. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso Books, 2002), liii.

¹¹ Downey, 'An Ethics of Engagement', 597.

¹² Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), xix.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For instance, Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972) and Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974).

¹⁶ Ellen Feiss, 'Endurance Performance: Post-2008', *Afterall*, May 23, 2012, accessed May 28, 2012, <http://www.afterall.org/online/endurance-performance-post-2008/>.

¹⁷ Claire Bishop, 'Outsourcing Authenticity? Delegated Performance in Contemporary Art', in *Double Agent*, ed. Claire Bishop and Silvia Tramontana (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2009), 111.

¹⁸ Criticisms of the likes of Santiago Sierra, and those regarding Artur Żmijewski to which I alluded earlier, focus explicitly on this point. See also the excellent article by Ellen Feiss on Abramović's re-performances. Feiss, 'Endurance Performance'.

¹⁹ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011). Kester, *The One and the Many*.

²⁰ Sven Lütticken, 'General Performance', *e-flux*, 31 (01/2012).

²¹ Jan Verwoert, 'Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform', *Dot Dot Dot*, 15 (2008), 90.

²² Jackson, *Social Works*, 2.

²³ Frances Guerin, 'Interview with Renzo Martens', *ArtSlant*, January, 2009, accessed May 23, 2012, <http://www.artslant.com/ny/artists/rackroom/39542>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ruben De Roo, 'Immortality as Ethics: Renzo Martens' *Enjoy Poverty*', in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Lieven De Cauter, Ruben De Roo, and Karel Vanhaesebrouck (Rotterdam: NAI, 2011), 144.

²⁶ This is most notably the case in Claire Bishop's 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110 (2004). 51–79.

²⁷ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy : Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

²⁸ Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', 66.

²⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 122.

³⁰ Martens comments on the existence of a similar dichotomy in his own work. 'Within this performance there are two Renzo Martens' in the film: First there is Renzo Martens the artist and second Renzo Martens the consumer. The two Renzos interact with each other to produce the duplicity communicated by the film: I am both the observer and the perpetrator of the African's exploitation.' Guerin, 'Interview with Renzo Martens'.

³¹ Anthony Howell, *The Analysis of Performance Art: A Guide to its Theory and Practice* (London: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999). 9.

³² For more information regarding the Bronze Soldier and the rioting which followed its relocation, see Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, *Bronze Soldier: April Riots* (Tallinn: Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, 2007).

³³ Tõnu Kaalep, 'Zombi Veneetsiasse? Jah', *Ekspress*, May 16, 2009, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://www.ekspress.ee/news/arvamus/arvamus/zombi-veneetsiasse-jah.d?id=27688427>. Merike Tamm, 'Pronkssõduri Koopia Äraviimine Saab Samuti Kunstiteoseks', *Postimees*, May 11, 2009, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://www.postimees.ee/?id=117623>.

³⁴ The Council of Europe published a report on the Bronze Soldier which claims the reopening of hostilities in 2009 were a result of Norman's actions. The Council of Europe's report can be found at <http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/estonia.php?aid=43>

³⁵ Kristina Norman, 'Poetic Investigations', in *After-War*, ed. Andreas Trossek (Tallinn: Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, 2009), 27.

³⁶ Tamm, 'Pronkssõduri koopia äraviimine saab samuti kunstiteoseks'.

³⁷ Badiou, *Ethics*, 4.

³⁸ Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 1.

³⁹ Lloyd, 'The Caress', 71; Johannes Saar, 'New Wave, Old Shores', in *New Wave: Essays*, ed. Anders Härm and Hanno Soans (Tallinn: Kunstihoone, 2007), 4; Stewart Martin, 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', *Third Text* 21, no. 2 (2007): 371.

⁴⁰ Erik Hagoort, *Good Intentions: Judging the Art of Encounter* (Amsterdam: Fonds BKVB, 2005), 7.

⁴¹ Downey, 'An Ethics of Engagement', 595.

⁴² Rita Raley, *Tactical Media* (Minneapolis, MN.: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2009), 12.

⁴³ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁴ ‘We will lay out a straightforward ethical path for Dow to follow to compensate the victims, clean up the plant site, and otherwise help make amends for the worst industrial disaster in history. It will be impossible for Dow not to react in some way, which should generate tons of press.’ Taken from <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/bbcbhopal>.

⁴⁵ Brandon Kelm, ‘Q&A with the Yes Men’s Andy Bichlbaum’, *Wired*, June 15, 2007, accessed May 27, 2012, http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2007/06/qa_with_the_yes/. Emma John and Alice Fisher, ‘Ethical Pioneers Changing the Way We Live’, *The Guardian*, February 6, 2011, accessed May 29, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/feb/06/ethical-living-martha-lane-fox>.

⁴⁶ Demos, ‘Toward a New Institutional Critique’, 91.

⁴⁷ Artur Żmijewski, “Foreword,” in *Forget Fear (A Reader): 7th Berlin Biennale*, ed. Joanna Warsza and Artur Żmijewski. (Berlin: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2012), 16.